

NNewsline



*Delivering Technology Access to
America's Communities*

Adult Literacy Classes Improve Lives in California Communities

For a child, learning to read is one of the most important life-changing skills. But in America today, one out of five adults still has difficulty with many everyday life skills that require basic reading: writing a check, reading a lease agreement, following directions for a recipe, or reading classified ads. Literacy enables a person to participate much more fully in life, from voting for the first time and playing an active role in the community to improving writing skills that might be the key to keeping a job or earning a promotion. Reading a book to a child can connect parents to their child's school and education.

Higher literacy levels significantly increase the average number of weeks employees work each year and often translates into higher median weekly earnings. A recent study for the Adult Education Office of the California Department of Education found that California residents with the lowest literacy proficiency scores worked an average of 22 weeks per year compared with 37 to 46 weeks for adults with the two highest score levels. Workers with the lowest proficiency levels reported median weekly earnings more than 50 percent lower than those with higher proficiency levels. Across the country, Neighborhood Networks centers strive to provide local residents with adult education classes that will help them increase their skills and move them closer to economic self-sufficiency.

Public libraries, schools, and institutions of higher learning are implementing communitywide programs to help individuals and families improve their reading skills. One program, Project Read, was implemented by the San Mateo County Library System and is offered throughout the county at public libraries. Project Read, a volunteer-based literacy program serving adults, children, and families, offers one-on-one tutoring as well as parent literacy and youth

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The literacy classes are . . . very important in helping [residents] find long-term employment opportunities in the area.

—Joan Pelkay

literacy courses that are designed to help students achieve their specific literacy goals. These can include a wide range of activities such as:

- ◆ Studying for the GED;
- ◆ Preparing for the citizenship exam;
- ◆ Improving job skills; and
- ◆ Reading books to a child or helping a child with homework.

In San Ysidro, California, the Vista Terrace Hills Neighborhood Networks Center worked with Casa Familiar—a nonprofit community development organization serving San Diego County—to conduct English as a Second Language (ESL) and literacy classes to help local residents increase their English skills and improve their literacy proficiency. In San Ysidro, approximately 56 percent of the population over the age of 25 has less than a high school education (or its equivalent). More than 30 percent of the residents between the ages of 18 and 64 are unable to speak English very well, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, and 41 percent of the households earn less than the area's median income.

The literacy and ESL programs help residents earn their equivalency diplomas and provide them with an opportunity to improve their English speaking and comprehension skills. “The classes focus on improving each person's literacy in their native language and then moves on to address their English speaking and comprehension skills,” relates Joan Pelkay, resident services director at the center. “The literacy classes are extremely beneficial to the residents and are very important in helping them find long-term employment opportunities in the area,” she adds.

Residents develop and improve language skills through online ESL courses in the learning centers. The center also offers courses that teach computer basics and how to access and use the Internet. These classes offer first-time computer users an introduction to technology and keyboarding skills.

Without the programs offered by the center, residents of the 262-unit complex would need to find services elsewhere in the city. “Casa Familiar offers literacy and ESL classes at various locations throughout the area, and it is more beneficial for us to work with their program,” Pelkay states.

In 2001 the Wakeland Housing and Development Corporation was awarded a \$30,000 grant from the California Consumer Protection Foundation to develop, design, and operate a Neighborhood

Networks Computer Center at the Vista Terrace Hills affordable housing development. Wakeland Housing and Development Corporation is a nonprofit corporation with a mission to develop quality affordable housing projects by working with communities, developers, municipalities, and redevelopment agencies. The corporation strives to create affordable homes based on quality designs, while promoting increased economic opportunities and long-term stability.

The center staff developed a wide range of programs and activities for Vista Terrace Hills residents. Many of the activities help reinforce ESL and literacy courses or provide new skills to use in school or the workplace. Program participants, with the help of the instructor, took images of their apartments and community and learned to view them from a new, creative perspective. The resident students are now working on their own Vista Terrace Hills Web page that will include local information and notices of local educational opportunities. ♦

For additional information about the Vista Terrace Hills adult literacy program, contact Joan Pelkay at (619) 235-2296 or jpelkay@wakelandhdc.com.



Mirabeau Afterschool Participants Celebrate Black History

An important focus of the Afterschool Enrichment Program (ASEP) at the Mirabeau Family Learning Center (MFLC) in New Orleans, Louisiana, is to help participants develop self-expression, discipline, and pride in their culture and heritage. This focus was evident in ASEP's successful production "Remember the Time," a celebration of Black history. Held on March 26, 2004, at the Beacon Light Outreach Ministries Temple, the play highlights some of the struggles and victories of African-American people.

"The idea for 'Remember the Time' came from Danna Gilmore, our former special-activity coordinator, and featured children between the ages of 6 and 12 in grades 1 through 6," says Michelle Mills, director of ASEP and the center's summer camp. "Instructors were given a format that they fully developed into skits based on their own individual skills and talents."

"The first- and second-grade participants performed a skit titled 'Who Am I?' which was written and directed by Sherrie Clark, parental involvement and book club coordinator," says Mills.

Instructors were given a format that they fully developed into skits based on their own individual skills and talents.

—Michelle Mills

For this skit, each participant dressed up like a famous African American whose life he or she had researched and delivered famous lines, such as “I have a dream,” spoken by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and “I float like a butterfly [and] sting like a bee,” spoken by Muhammad Ali.

Shantrell Adams, attendance and discipline coordinator, wrote and directed “Great Moments in Black History: Little People Can Do Big Things,” four short skits performed by third-grade participants. Mills says, “The skits were based on Nzingha’s (Amazon Queen of Matamba’s) fight against the Portuguese, the Amistad slave revolt, the Greensboro sit-in, and ... Carlos and Smith[’s] protest for human rights at the 1968 Olympic games.” (See <http://umsis.miami.edu/~jgawron/olympics.html>.) “The purpose of these skits was to show the significance of these events in the advancement of Black people. In the Nzingha skit, the participants portrayed Blacks performing everyday duties, being approached by the Portuguese about wanting to make a bargain that was actually enslavement. Nzingha stood fearless and taught her people how to fight. When the Portuguese returned, Nzingha and her people fought bravely against them,” explains Mills. “In the Greensboro sit-in skit, the participants reenacted the incident [in which] college students went into a Whites-only restaurant to be served dinner. The participants sat at a makeshift counter until the police were called to remove them.”

“The fourth- through sixth-grade participants took the audience on a ‘fun-a-delic’ ride titled ‘Back Down Memory Lane—The Evolution of Black Music,’” says Mills, who wrote and directed this skit. “The purpose of this performance was to explain how the music of Black people has evolved from the spirituals into some of the most popular types of music today. It also displayed the influence music has had on a world in turmoil. The setting for this skit was a music class, where a teacher gave students a written assignment on Black music. Instead of completing the assignment as given, the students collaborated to complete the project through song and dance. The main purpose of this skit was to show that reaching back to our roots is the only way we can progress, move forward, and live the lives our ancestors fought for and the life we are still fighting for,” says Mills.

According to Mills, the highlight of the production was a special performance titled “Keeping the Beat Alive: The Heritage of Congo Square,” a musical tribute that she cowrote and codirected with Herbert Taylor, ASEP’s music enrichment instructor. Mills says, “I have always wondered why I walked to the beat of my own drum. Now I know that it is because of Congo Square, an open space on the Claude Treme Plantation in New Orleans. Although this space was used to sell slaves, it was also the Sunday morning

meeting place of slaves, free people of color, and White onlookers. Keeping with the African traditions of call and response music and dance, these people would come in with their best garments, produce, and goods for exchange and congregate,” adds Mills.

“As America’s oldest Black community, this performance displayed the reverberations of Congo Square then and now. The participants relived a Sunday morning in Congo Square and played their own bamboula piece, composed by Taylor, and a second piece composed by Chad Brown, a trumpeter for the Little Stooges Brass Band. In addition, this skit was a reminder of New Orleans’ rich heritage and culture. We encouraged everyone in attendance to take the time to visit the cultural places in our city that we often overlook and reminded them that they walk to the beat of their own drum. Congo Square is one of the jewels in the crown of pride and has made a mark in Louisiana Black history,” adds Mills.

Considering their ages, Mills believes that the children performed well. “The parents and other attendees praised the performances. After every skit, the children would run up to the staff and ask ‘Did we do well? Did you like it?’” says Mills. “The curtain call was the most exciting part for them. They had so much energy as the audience stood and gave them ongoing applause. One student was so excited she started screaming, ‘We did it, and we rock! Yeah!’”

Overcoming Obstacles

According to Mills, one of the main obstacles ASEP encountered was finding a place that was big enough to hold the production. “Since we had several skits, we had to find a place that had enough room for changing costumes and holding the children until their performances,” explains Mills. “However, we overcame this obstacle with the assistance of the Beacon Light International Baptist Church, which provided a site at a very low cost.” Another obstacle was conflict of interest. “One of the participants did not want to portray Alex Haley,” says Mills. “We continued working with him until he decided that he wanted to be Ray Charles, perhaps because he would be able to wear sunglasses, have a cane, and play the keyboard. He was a cool ‘kat,’” she adds. Other obstacles faced were helping the children learn their parts and coordinating practice time so that it did not conflict with other aspects of the afterschool program, such as karate and drumming, or become a distraction to students who were not practicing.

Mills encourages any center contemplating such a production to shoot for the stars. “I remember our staff sitting down, looking at the agenda, and thinking, ‘How on earth are we going to pull this





off?” says Mills. “After receiving the concept [from Gilmore], we discussed it with our groups, got their input, and looked inside ourselves to see what we could offer. What made this production work was the fact that all staff members at MFLC were able to share a part of themselves in this project. Once people heard about what we were going to do, they pitched in. Even when ideas and changes sprang up like tulips, everyone knew one another’s limits. When you have a complete circle, it is easy to move forward. Although we had many obstacles, it was not hard to fix the problems with a solid foundation.”

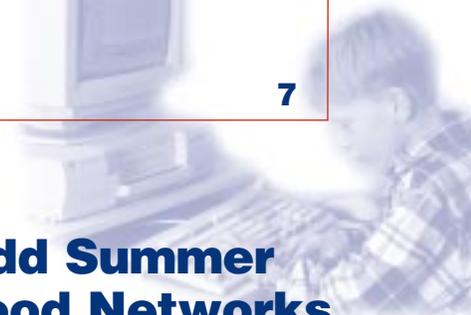
“‘Remember the Time’ was the first of many productions for me,” says Mills. “Just the look in the children’s faces and the spark in their eyes that they did so well . . . made me proud of what I do. This summer, we may do an encore presentation of ‘Remember the Time.’ If possible, I would like to make it MFLC’s annual Black history project,” says Mills. ♦

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Special Programs Add Summer Sizzle to Neighborhood Networks Centers

Now is the time to gear up for summer youth programs. Special vacation activities—from field trips to academic enrichment programs—take additional planning, staff, and resources. To help Neighborhood Networks centers get started with summer program planning, *NNewsline* highlights some innovative ideas from the field.

Community Partnerships Increase Opportunities for Fun

At the Youth Development Program in Rapid City, South Dakota, Director Sam Chasing Horse says he and his staff established new local partnerships to provide previously unattainable summer activities for children from low-income families. For example, in 2004 the Rapid City YMCA gave 120 pool passes to the center. This donation gave the children free access to pools that Chasing Horse says they would not be able to access on their own. “These are state-of-the-art pools,” Chasing Horse explains, “and these children come from families that cannot afford memberships.”

Through another partnership with the local movie theater, each Wednesday afternoon center staff was able to take children to see a movie. For a discount price, which the center covered for each child, participants received a ticket, popcorn, a soda, and candy. “The theater owner is very kind, and he loves kids. We are extremely grateful for his generosity,” explains Chasing Horse.

The center also provided educational programs. For the past 5 years, the center has offered a reading program, Dream Corner, which focuses on helping children in kindergarten through sixth grade bolster their reading skills. The center also reinvented its fitness program. The center used to offer a somewhat vigorous ROTC program. However, Chasing Horse explains that many children at his center suffer from asthma and were unable to participate in the previous program. He says the center offered a new Health Wellness program in 2004 that required “only as much physical effort as the children can give. They no longer had to go all the way out like they did with the previous program,” says Chasing Horse.

The center also offered arts and crafts activities and afternoon outings such as field trips to the local park to play kickball. All

The theater owner is very kind, and he loves kids. We are extremely grateful for his generosity.

—Sam Chasing Horse

activities were free to children. Chasing Horse says at least 70 children a day came to the center for the various activities.

Virginia Campers Anticipate “Wild” Fieldtrips and Drama in the Woods

Megan Marsick, center director at the Lincolnia Community Resource Center in Alexandria, Virginia, developed her center’s 5-week summer camp program. Geared toward 6- to 12-year-old children, the 2004 program offered daily arts and crafts activities, a nutrition program, and computer classes. There were also several field trips, including a trip to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., the children’s favorite outing. To help introduce children to the fine arts, the center participated in Theater in the Woods, a program sponsored by the Wolf Trap Center for the Performing Arts in Vienna, Virginia, which provided free tickets for children to see selected performances throughout the summer. The Kicks for Kids program, sponsored by the D.C. United men’s professional soccer team, provided free game tickets to center children.

Marsick says that a center volunteer organized a children’s drama club that met twice a week. “The children put on a play at a barbecue held for them and their families at the end of camp,” explains Marsick. She also invited parents to help chaperone the children’s outings. Camp costs \$50 for each child who attends. According to Marsick, “At only \$10 a week, this is a great way for kids to experience camp at minimum cost to their families.”

Madison Center Takes Students on a Cultural Odyssey

Paul Ly Tong Pao, director of the Bayview International Center for Education and Arts in Madison, Wisconsin, believes that youth who participated in either of his center’s two summer programs found the experience both educational and exciting. According to Pao, middle and high school students were eligible to participate in the center’s main program, Bayview Summer Recreation. Pao says he and his staff designed this program to help students gain skills in handling the pressures and problems they often face in their age group. “We offered reading help, [courses on] drug prevention and respect for friends and family, and chances to perform community service,” says Pao. “We want to help these students become more open and successful.”

The program’s training courses took place 4 days a week, with 2 days of new courses and 2 days of repeat courses. Students could also perform their community service on any of these days. As a



We want to take students to places that their parents might not be able to afford. . . .

—Paul Ly Tong Pao



reward for participation, Pao says the center scheduled field trips every Friday. “We want to take students to places that their parents might not be able to afford...” For example, Pao says he and his staff planned a trip to Noah’s Ark, a nearby amusement park, for one of their field trips. The center paid for the students’ tickets and provided bus transportation.

Bayview’s second 2004 summer program, Around the World, brought a measure of multiculturalism to elementary school-aged participants. “For 8 weeks, students explored the many aspects of different cultures,” says Pao, “including each culture’s people, language, customs, clothing, and food.” The program focused on Brazil, Egypt, Japan, Russia, and Morocco. The center arranged for native speakers from each of these countries to give presentations to the students.

The center scheduled activities for All Around the World for 4 days a week. Students from the subprogram who received commendations from center staff for their weekly participation were allowed to join older students on their weekly field trips. Additionally, Pao says that the city of Madison provided daily breakfasts and lunches for students participating in either program. Both programs were open to and free for the entire community.

For more information on these and other summer programs, please contact the Neighborhood Networks toll-free hotline at (888) 312-2743, or visit www.NeighborhoodNetworks.org. ♦

Enhance Summer Learning With Educational Software

Summertime provides a wonderful opportunity to enjoy the outdoors, play with friends, and relax after the school year. However, as many teachers know, summer is often a time when students lose some of the new skills and knowledge they had learned during the year. Neighborhood Networks centers can help students retain knowledge and learn new skills by incorporating fun learning activities into summer programs. Centers can use some of their financial resources to purchase educational software that will help students remain mentally active.

Many educational software programs are available from various companies. Centers should consider ease of use, educational value, and kid appeal when evaluating software before purchase. A search of the Internet using key search terms—*Education*,



Software, Review—will result in a number of Web sites that provide unbiased evaluations of popular software products. Many of these software packages sell for less than \$20 and are valuable tools to help children and young adults build and strengthen the skills vital to academic success. Consider consulting with local schools for recommendations about software products that can complement a student's education.

When selecting software programs that help build and reinforce math skills, consider the age range of the students and the appropriate concepts they are learning. Students in grades K–2 are working on basic math concepts such as counting, addition, subtraction, money skills, telling time, and strategies that help them tackle math problems. Children in grades 3–6 are developing skills such as multiplication, division, fractions, decimals, and word problems. Software for this age group should help students increase their speed and accuracy of basic concepts and challenge them to decipher and solve increasingly complex problems. Students in grades 7–12 are building skills in algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and calculus. Software for this age group should challenge the learner, help develop problem-solving strategies, and prepare them for college entrance exams.



Every student's academic success depends on the ability to read effectively. Software that helps students with reading and writing skills is readily available and provides a fun and interactive way for learners to develop stronger skills and techniques that will help them in all subject areas. Children in grades K–2 are developing pre-reading and basic reading skills. Software should help them develop phonics, basic reading comprehension, and vocabulary skills. Programs for students in grades 3–6 continue to build vocabulary, comprehension, and interpretation of increasingly complex material. The software should challenge the learner in an interactive way and provide an evaluation of the students' reading comprehension. Students in grades 7–12 are strengthening their vocabulary, reading, and writing skills. Programs for this age group should help the student improve their comprehension and prepare for entrance exams.

Helping students retain and strengthen their skills over the summer break is a wonderful opportunity to start a homework and tutoring club that can continue into the school year. Centers should identify the ages of the students that use the center on a daily basis, keep in mind the learner's ability level, and identify interactive and comprehensive ways to incorporate educational software into a broader learning environment. ♦

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